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Ed Bland: An Artistic Journey

Throughout my professional life, my creative efforts have been haunted by aspects of a cultural warfare that has been simmering under the world's cultures for several centuries. It is a warfare between a pagan prolongation of the eternal moment found in the traditional religious rites and music of Black West Africans living below the Sahara and conventional Western civilization's pursuit of postponed rewards. As a consequence, in Western civilization there is never a Now, only a vague future.

Ironically, the African slave trade, with all its horrors and social disruption, also presented an opportunity for transformation. It was the slaves' ability to rise to the occasion and create a new culture and persona that enabled them to survive and coexist in America. Traumatized by slave-ship voyages, deprived of languages, Gods, families, communities, and rituals, it became necessary that the slaves modify what remained from their past and invent new cultural forms.

In a range of work encompassing "Penderecki Funk," Atari Video Games, "Skunk Juice," THE CRY OF JAZZ, *Urban Classical*, the Detroit Symphony, Dizzy Gillespie, Hip Hop, "Urban Counterpoint." I have composed music that celebrates the pagan prolongation of the eternal Now.

Confrontation and intelligence have been dominant qualities of my work since my youthful days as a jazz protégé (clarinet/sax) in Chicago. Later as a composition student in the early 40s, I was one of the first musicians of my generation in Chicago to write atonally and use Schoenberg's 12-tone system. Through jazz, I was quickly immersed in the harmonic language and sonorities of Art Tatum and Duke Ellington. Through my many performances of concert music, I was heavily exposed to the harmonies and sonorities of Debussy and Chopin.

I viewed Western Art Music as dead music, of interest for gaining great technical command of one's instrument, but not music to be enjoyed as a living, breathing entity. With the technical command gained from playing and studying Art music, I felt I would then be able to improvise more interesting and daring solos in jazz. I viewed jazz as limiting because of the regularity and predictability of its cadential structure.

My world was changed when I heard a recording of Stravinsky's "Rite Of Spring." Not only was the music alive, it swung! I decided to become a composer because I could then have a freer formal expanse than was offered by jazz and a much more plentiful, colorful and powerful instrumental palette at my disposal. I felt that if I could uncover the secret of why Stravinsky's music swung, and combine that knowledge with what I knew

about swinging from my jazz background, I might be on a fruitful mission.

After finishing my military duties in World War II, I returned to college. I decided to go to the University of Chicago, a place noted for its investigation of the basic principles of various subject matters. I hoped that the same attitude extended to the music department. However, I had been warned by one of my previous professors that the music department at the University of Chicago was anti-musical but I decided to give it a try anyway. My need for a school where the professors could both think and argue with me overcame the warnings I had received.

I felt that I needed a school where I could question the very foundations of Western Music and also debate with the teachers. With such an attitude, I knew I wouldn't be welcomed at a conservatory. There I would learn what was supposed to be the craft of composition but I would not learn why the craft had to be conceived of in that manner and only in that manner.

I wasn't welcomed at the University of Chicago's music department either. At that time, it was a completely musicologically-based department. Papers concerning historical musicological subjects were more important than living music.

Meanwhile, the music I was hearing in my head and struggling to write, given my limited technical ability, was unlike any other contemporary music I had heard or was hearing. I suspected that the wellspring of these musical ideas was based on my black American experience, both musical and cultural. In the late 40s, very few American professors of Art music had any knowledge of or respect for jazz. Of utmost concern was the conception of musical form.

It seemed to be conceived of spatially, as architectural ground plans with various operations to achieve balance. Fine enough if that's what one wants. But I didn't want that. Semiconsciously I was groping for a conception of form that was based on the importance of the present moment and was conceived of temporally.

Highly suggestive to me were John Dewey's philosophical works, *Art As Experience*, and *Logic: Theory of Inquiry*. Correctly or incorrectly, what I was able to take away from Dewey to use in my own compositional development was the notion that artistic creation is thinking in qualities. Qualitative thinking means the construction of a means/end continuum of qualities. The transforming situation evolves during backs and forth between qualitative/quantitative thinking phases, resulting in some type of resolved configuration. An analysis of this configuration gives the form. Aesthetically, emphasis is continually focused on the present moment, the eternal present, or as I like to call it, the eternal Now.

One of my counterpoint teachers at the University of Chicago remarked that West African drumming and its polymetric structure was more intricate than Bach's counterpoint. Eventually I bought a recording of West African drumming and discovered that in many pieces there was an adherence to the eternal present. In fact, celebration of the eternal Now was the norm. With these insights, I knew it was time to leave this musicological wasteland and go to a conservatory in order to sharpen my compositional skills.

After passing the requisite contrapuntal, orchestration and composition final exams at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, I was faced with the problem of earning a living. I never was interested in teaching. I don't have the temperament. Attending college was primarily for the purpose of learning and questioning what was

taught there rather than earning degrees in order to work in academe.

Reading articles in *Die Riehe*, keeping abreast of what Stockhausen, serialism, the outgrowths of the dissonant counterpoint theories of Charles Seeger and Henry Cowell, music concrete, and John Cage were doing, along with studying the polymetric intricacies of West African drumming, the newer developments of jazz and refining my Art music arranging skills, kept me quite occupied.

I also wrote music for several art, semi-documentary, and educational films, in addition to a number of popular songs. I thought through writing such songs I could gain entrée to a job in the record industry as a music arranger. Eventually writing songs got me to Chess Records, the home of Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley, Howling Wolf, Chuck Berry, and many others. Needless to say, the songs I wrote were ill suited for Chess, which was a Race Records company. (Later Race Records were called Rhythm and Blues.)

It was obvious to me that racism, thievery, and contempt for the blacks who made up Chess' talent pool was rampant on the part of the Chess brothers, owners of the label. This was not surprising. What was surprising to me was that the music these southern blacks created celebrated the eternal present, thus intersecting with the dominant interest of my compositional studies. Especially significant in this regard were the early recordings of Bo Diddley whose music was more starkly polymetric than that of the others. His use of additive rhythms, conflicting with accentual ones, was much more pronounced than one could find in jazz.

Around this time, intriguing reports came into the Chess offices of white youths venturing into black neighborhoods to buy the music of these Delta Blues musicians and other Rhythm and Blues artists. This phenomenon was occurring in many cities North and South. Vee Jay Records, also in Chicago, and Atlantic Records in New York City were other labels noticing similar trends.

It became obvious to me as I studied the *Billboard* hit parade charts, and watched the trainloads of southern blacks arriving in Chicago seeking work due to a vast technological change taking place in cotton picking down south, that this was more than a ninety-day music trend. It was something more significant sociologically, economically and culturally.

What finally convinced me that I was correct was the creation of Elvis Presley, whose movements and singing were based on the singing and dancing of the black artist, Little Richard, and his colleagues.

From New Orleans and Big Band jazz of the 20s and 30s, the impact of the eternal Now had widened to include the market of pop music and lower middle-class whites

Duplicating the phenomenon of lower middle-class whites imitating the dress, walk and talk of blacks were upper-class white intellectuals, like those clustered around the University of Chicago and other American colleges and universities, who were imitating the life-styles of blacks as well.

Musically, however, their take-off point was West Coast jazz, which many blacks and whites at the time thought was an attempt to remove blackness from jazz. Frequently I was verbally accosted by these would-be jazz critics and had to listen to their theories about jazz and blacks. These jazz fans, who were musically illiterate, would lecture me about jazz music, which they couldn't play and had no experience of except as consumers.

Eventually I grew tired of this barrage of nonsense and enlisted the help of some

friends to make the semi-documentary film, *THE CRY OF JAZZ*. We started work on this film in 1956. The structural and syntactical features of jazz were used as a metaphor for the Black American Experience.

Looking back fifty years, I realize that one of the shortcomings of *THE CRY OF JAZZ* is that we didn't use the concept of black culture to help construct the film. As far as I'm aware, that concept didn't come into American consciousness until the late 1960s. However, if one acknowledges the confrontational spirit of Hip Hop, one can call *THE CRY OF JAZZ* the first Hip Hop film. It was released in 1959, nine years before the assassination of Martin Luther King.

According to Kenneth Tynan, critic of the *London Observer*, the CRY was a landmark film as it was the first film made by black Americans that challenged the humanity of white Americans.

Willard Van Dyke, pre-eminent American film documentarian and head of the Film Division of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, said the CRY predicted the riots in American cities of the 60s and 70s.

Simultaneously, while noting the influence of aspects of black culture on certain artifacts of the West, I had immersed myself into the study of as much of Western Art Music as I could tolerate. While there were many elegant and ingenious works, those that I found most significant musically and emotionally were Beethoven's "Grosse Fugue," the last movement of his "Hammerklavier Sonata" and the Scherzo from his "String quartet op.135." I had lost interest in Stravinsky except to keep track of his new technical journeys. Whatever insight he may have had into the eternal Now with the "Rite" was abandoned with his foray into ragtime and his neo-classicism.

The aesthetic of the eternal Now had guided me to and through jazz to the "Rite of Spring," the beginnings of R&B and Delta Blues. Otherwise I was wandering lost in the sea of serialism, musique concrete, and Cowell/Seeger's dissonant counterpoint. I certainly wasn't getting informed about the eternal Now in those waters.

One day, while shooting scenes in a black gospel church for *THE CRY OF JAZZ*, I was stunned by the power and immediacy of the music. Here was the strongest manifestation of the eternal Now I had experienced since the "Rite of Spring." I had to ask myself, why was I fooling around with Stravinsky's neo-classicism, serialism or dissonant counterpoint when I had black gospel right at my fingertips?

The music was about as tonal as one could get, and harmonically very simple, although there were a number of peculiar harmonic progressions, passing notes and other traits that had to be learned. I promised myself that I would study gospel music and make it part of my arsenal as soon as I could, after I finished the CRY. This strong reaction was to the music of black gospel, not to any of its religious elements. I had to re-examine myself musically.

As interest in *THE CRY OF JAZZ* had arisen in New York City, in 1960, I moved my family from Chicago to take advantage of the integrated musicians union there.

Facing the problem of earning a living, my command of several canons of music – Western Art, jazz, gospel, funk, R&B, soul and West African drumming – made it possible for me to work as an arranger in the record industry and as a composer/orchestrator for film.

While doing myriad recording projects for R&B and soul singers, including sessions with Jimi Hendrix and George Benson, my composition, "Skunk Juice," evolved

from writing for a Harlem-based R&B band, the Pazant Brothers. The musical objective was to create a raw, colorful, funky, soulful sound combined with complex linear patterns, thus contrasting mightily with groups like James Brown, Kool and The Gang, the Stax Records bands in Memphis, and Motown's Junior Walker. This music that I was writing for the Pazants was both funky and intelligent, and showed many degrees of polymetric design as I pushed on with my pursuit of the eternal NOW as best I could in what was essentially a commercial setting.

In 1974, after writing for Lionel Hampton, Al Hirt, Dizzy Gillespie and many other prominent acts, Vanguard Records hired me as executive producer for the label. During my tenure there, I added Blues legend, Big Mama Thornton, to Vanguard's roster.

In addition to establishing a jazz line with Clark Terry, James Moody, Elvin Jones, Bunky Green, and Roland Prince, I discovered and produced the artist Camille Yarbrough and her *Iron Pot Cooker* album in 1975. Yarbrough's *Iron Pot Cooker* has been called "A landmark album that pre-dates the commercial breakthrough of hip hop. . . . Without question, 'The Iron Pot Cooker' is a precursor to Lauryn Hill." (From the CD liner notes by Kevin Powell.)

Iron Pot Cooker was ahead of its time. The culture began to catch up with my musical vision twenty-five years later, in 2000, when Fat Boy Slim sampled "Take Yo' Praise," from "Iron Pot Cooker" and made the recording "Praise You," which was a huge international hit.

I also signed the Pazant Brothers to Vanguard. I produced their album, *Loose and Juicy*, in 1975. Twenty-two years later, in 1997, this LP was re-released on CD by Vanguard. My composition, "A Gritty Nitty," on this LP and CD, was sampled three times on three different Sony Records releases by the Hip Hop group, Cypress Hill. Some, if not all of these three CDs became platinum hits.

Wanting to further enlarge my catalog of Art music, I left Vanguard to concentrate on composing. Upon hearing my "Piece For Chamber Orchestra," which was composed in 1979, Gunther Schuller, American composer/conductor/author said, "An amazing tour de force in terms of relentless energy and build up of tension...a fascinating strong piece." "Original and Fresh," said Bruce Creditor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

In the mid-80s, as the studio recording scene started fading away, I resettled in Los Angeles and wrote music for motion pictures, television, and occasional record productions, while adding to my Art music catalog.

In 1998, when I was 72, a 26-year-old hip hopper from South Central LA listened to my "Piece For Chamber Orchestra" and called it "Rap Without Words." My music had already crossed several generation gaps, and there was more to come. Soon two CDs of my Art music emerged: *Urban Classical - The Music Of Ed Bland* on Cambria Records; and *Dancing Through The Walls* on Delos International Records.

With my "Piece For Chamber Orchestra," I had turned the corner and created the first of a series of works that celebrate the eternal Now.

One of the problems facing me as an Art music composer is that of getting an economically sufficient following. My thoughts turned to the universal acceptance of the pop song.

The curse of pop music and jazz is that they are too predictable. Ideally, Art music should demand unpredictability.

In my 29 "Urban Counterpoint" piano works, the musical language I've used is in

the vernacular – the language of pop music and jazz. Unpredictability is introduced into this vernacular setting through a rampaging polyphonic/polymetric texture.

Unpredictability, by definition, means that the listener is forced to think about vernacular musical relationships, and thus has moved from a pop music approach to a serious/art music approach. This phenomenon is what these 29 short piano works (Vols.1-4) and the larger “Classical Soul and Three Chaconnes in Blue” (Vol. 5) address.

The 29 piano works are stand-alone pieces. A unifying factor can be found in the effects these works give of Tatum-like improvisation in a contrapuntal situation or as musical essays on “Tatum with Counterpoint.”

Currently I am composing several works based on my old-school funk roots. I have recently written several orchestral works and also a series of percussion works called “Penderecki Funk.”

With the universal acceptance of the eternal Now through ragtime, blues, jazz, soul, R&B, and Hip Hop, one can wonder what effect this acceptance will have on the evolution of Art music. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that celebration of the eternal Now has become the norm of the musical world.

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